

The Mischief of Evil Company.

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SERMON

Preach'd to

Young People

ON

Easter-Monday, April 14, 1707.

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L O N D O N,

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P R O V. I. 10.

My Son, if Sinners entice thee, consent thou not.

MA N was made a *sociable* Creature, capable of conversing with his Fellow-Creatures, and with an Inclination to Society and Conversation. 'Tis the distinguishing Perfection of Humane Nature from all the other Inhabitants of this lower World, and the noblest Entertainment of a reasonable Creature. Solitude and Silence require a *Self-sufficiency*, enough in ones self alone, which is proper to the Divine Being ; but is a most uncomfortable and disagreeable State to a needy and sociable Being, that is naturally delirous, as well as stands in continual need of the Assistance of his Fellow-Creatures. The Lord God said, *'tis not good that the Man should be alone* *. But as the best Things in Nature, when perverted and corrupted, prove the worst, and greater Mischiefs often spring from the Abuse of Good, than the Use of what is directly Evil ; so 'tis here : Society and Conversation that was naturally innocent and pleasant, capable of the greatest Improvements, as well as Delights of Life, is frequently made, by the Sins and the Follies of Men, one of the greatest Snares of Life, and Occasion of numberless Mischiefs in the World. And indeed, as the State of things lie at present, and Mankind are pleased to order the Matter, there is scarce any Conversation in the World, or any Business of Life, without some Danger this way, especially to younger Persons : So that I reckon this Subject will be not only proper and suitable to the present Occasion, but of universal Concernment, and of considerable Moment and Consequence to all.

The Words are spoken by *Solomon*, the wisest and most experienced Man, that had the greatest Gift of natural Wisdom, and largest Knowledge and Trial of the World, of any Man that ever lived in it : And as they are delivered in the Language of a Father to his Child, may be conceived to have a more engaging Air ; and to come with the greater Authority : *My Son, if Sinners entice, &c. i. e.* Beware of the Snares of evil Company.

* Gen. 2. 18.

In the handling of this Subject, that I may make it the more plain and easy to every one, I shall comprize what I have to offer under these 3 general Heads. I. Consider the Evil it self here caution'd against, *i. e.* the *Enticings of Sinners*. II. The Caution or Warning against it; *Consent thou not*. III. Conclude with proper Counsels and Directions to preserve from the Infection, and recover from the Snare of evil Company.

I. I shall consider the *Evil* it self that is cautioned against, the Enticements of Sinners; *My Son, if Sinners entice thee*. 'Tis not an Expression of Doubtfulness or Uncertainty; a remote and distant Supposition of something that may only possibly happen, or very rarely comes to pass: But 'tis the Supposition of a very common Case, of what will certainly come to pass, and falls out every Day in the World. And so 'tis no more than if 'twere said, When *Sinners entice thee*; As oft as ever this happens. You must be sure to expect thus much where-ever you live, and with whomsoever you converse. The Devil, the great Tempter to Sin, will strongly instigate and urge them to it, and their own desperately wicked Hearts will naturally prompt and incline them to it.

In the Management of this part of the Subject, I shall enquire into 2 Things. 1. What are those *Evils* to which Sinners entice; the more usual Sins of evil Company. 2. The Nature of this Enticing, or how they entice.

§ 1. To what *Evils*: What are the special Sins of evil Company. Some think from the Form of this Expression, *My Son*, &c. and the foregoing Context, that Enticings from the Duty Children owe their Parents, is particularly meant: And indeed this is an unnatural Wickedness, that is often pointed at with very great Severity in the Writings of the wise Man. But I think it may fitly be extended to all the Evils of Conversation, as 'tis not restrained by any Reason of Things, or any Circumstance of the Text: And as we consist of Body and Soul, of a reasonable and a sensible Part, accordingly this Evil may be reduced to two Heads.

(1.) Corrupting the Mind with *Error* and false Principles. And of this there are many Sorts, according to the different Make and Humour of the Sinners with whom we converse. The most common are either such as respect Religion, and the Worship of God; or Humanity, civil Government, and common Life.

Such as respect *Religion*, are all *Atheistick* Notions that tend to the Denial or the Disparagement of the Divine Being, and of his glorious Perfections; to give wrong Apprehensions, as well as to deface the *Idea* of God in our Minds, representing him in a false

allse Light, and otherwise than he really is ; particularly as to his most essential and eminent Perfections in the Government of the fallen World, his Justice and Mercy ; as if he were either meer *Fury*, as implacable as the *Devil* ; or *easy* and unconcerned, and altogether such an one as our *selves*. Such again, are the Principles of *Deism*, denying revealed Religion, and running down the Authority of the Bible, tho it rectify and fix the truest Notions of natural Religion, and raises and refines the best Principles of their own admired Morality, that ever yet appeared in the World. I might add to these the loose and dangerous Principles of those that insult the Divinity of the Redeemer, cavil at the Mysteries of Faith, dispute away the great Institutions of the Gospel ; that change the entire Scheme of our Christianity, and, as they are pleased to manage the Debate, weaken, if not undermine the Authority of that Book that is the great Ground of our Hopes, and only Guide to eternal Life. In short, whatsoever Notions tend to weaken our Reverence of God, and of his Word, and to encourage Security and Sin.

And as for such as respect *Humanity*, i. e. Civil Government and common Life, I reckon all Principles of Disloyalty and Rebellion against lawful Rulers, that import any undutiful Disrespect, or are injurious to the publick Peace ; all corrupt Maxims of Trade and Business ; as evading Oaths, Cheating, &c. which are the Mysteries of Iniquity that mingle with every Mystery of Trade. In short, whatsoever tends, tho by a remoter Consequence, to weaken the Authority of Government, and the Obligations of mutual Duty and mutual Faith among Mankind, especially of natural and civil Relations, as between Prince and People, Masters and Servants, Parents and Children. I'll only further observe, That as evil Principles are fruitful of, and even naturally lead to evil Actions, so they fortify the Mind against the properest Means of Conviction and Amendment, and tend to embolden and harden in Sin. Hereupon,

(2.) Debauching their *Manners* with sinful Practices. And these are numberless, and differ according to the different Disposition of the Sinner : And so there is scarce any one Evil in all the World that is not some time or other brought into Conversation, and that may not be learnt by evil Company. I'll only instance in some more common and notorious Evils of this kind.

Evil *Communication* * ; sinful Discoursing together, which will always be according as the evil Principles, and vicious Inclinations of their Mind direct. Thus, for Instance, there is often idle Talking, wretched Impertinencies, and empty Jest, the

* 1 Cor. 15. 33.

meer Chat and Tattle of vain and idle People, that seem to spring from no settled Principle, or tend to any certain End; and as to any Purposes of real Entertainment, as well as serious Improvement, is wholly unprofitable and vain, like an Arrow let fly at all Adventures in the open Air. *Censorious Talking*; sitting in Judgment, and passing Sentence upon the Dress and Behaviour, it may be upon the Hearts and Thoughts of their Neighbours, and making unkind and severe Reflections (an unnatural and spiteful Entertainment) with the Sins and Follies, it may be with the Afflictions and Misfortunes of others. Wanton and *obscene Talking*: This especially in younger Persons, that are naturally more warm and lively, makes dangerous Impressions, and leaves ill Relishes upon the Mind; and by the help of wanton Songs, and impure Images and Representations of Things, debauch the Imagination, corrupt the Passions, and pollute the Mind. *Profane Talk*; when Men of profligate Minds, and hardened in Sin, talk of the most sacred Things, and of the grossest Wickedness, with great Irreverence, it may be, with open Defiance and Contempt of God, as in customary Oaths and Curses, profane Swearing by the sacred Name of God, and direful Imprecations of Damnation upon themselves.

Sports and Games. All unlawful or immoderate Recreations and Pleasures of Life, that waste unreasonable Measures of precious Time, cause great Interruptions and Neglects of the proper Business of Life, consume the Substance and Estate, abate all Relishes and Impressions of Good, and often provoke the angry Passions and fleshly Lusts; as lewd Plays, promiscuous Dancing, Cards and Dice, &c.

Intemperance and Excess: Turning the Creatures of God, which are good, and to be received with Thanksgiving, into pois'nous Draughts and *Feeding without Fear*. When, instead of relieving and refreshing their weak and tired Nature, they load and oppress it, gratify the brutish Appetite, and cloud and disturb the nobler Powers of their Souls. When they are mighty to drink Wine, and glory in their own and in others Shame; striving to drink down others, and to drown their own Reason and Sense; destroying their Health, and disposing themselves to unnatural Quarrels, and the grossest Impurities.

Violence and Theft: This is directly referred to in the Text; *Let us wait for Blood, and lurk privily for the Innocent without Cause.* — *We shall find all precious Substance, and fill our Houses with Spoil**. They lie in wait for the harmless and unguarded Traveller, rob him of his Substance, and enrich themselves

* Ver. 11, 13.

with his Spoil. Such are our High-way-men and House-Breakers : The Clubs and Cabals of Rogues and Robbers, that stick at no Villany or Violence to maintain their Lusts, and compass their ambitious or their desperate Designs. These are some of the more usual Mischiefs of evil Company.

§. 2. *How they entice* : The Nature of this *Enticing*. Now as Reason and Sense are the two great Principles and Powers of our Nature, by which we act our selves, and are capable of being moved and acted upon by others ; so answerably thereto all the Methods of a Sinner's Enticing may be reduced to these two General Heads. 1. In a way of Discourse. 2. By the Power of Example. Both are very powerful and fatal to Multitudes.

(1.) In a way of *Discourse*. And as the principal Powers of an humane Soul are the Understanding and Will, or the Reason and Affections ; so Sinners accordingly entice in their Discourse, either by false Reasonings, or flattering Perswasions.

1. By false *Reasoning*. Not that there is any thing in the Enticings of Sinners of true Sense or sound Reason, that is fit to lead the Understanding, or convince the Reason of a Man : but they use the Appearance and Pretence of Reason to work upon their Minds, and dispose them to comply ; and that either by misrepresenting the Truth, or disguising and colouring over the Evil of things.

Sometimes you shall find them make gross *Misrepresentations* of the Truth of things ; they will represent the Commands of Christ (in spite of his express Word, and the constant Experience of all good Men) as *grievous*, and his light and easy *Toke* as an unnatural Restraint, and an intolerable Burden, and so raise high Prejudices and hard Thoughts in the Minds of Men against the blessed God and serious Religion. They ridicule and render odious all the Forms and Appearances of real, and especially of eminent Goodness ; arraign and cry down all Pretensions to higher Degrees of Purity, and greater Strictness of Life, as arrant Pride and Hypocrisie ; and throw disparaging Reflections upon the plainest Duties of practical Godliness, and all the Vertues and Graces of the Christian Life.

At other times, you shall find them *disguising* the Evil of Things ; hiding the Deformity of Sin, and covering over with false Paint the native Ugliness and the hideous Form, that naked and unmasked wou'd startle and afright. Nothing is more common than for Sinners to recommend by such artful Disguises the vilest Practices and the most odious Sins. Under the Pretence of Refreshment after the Toil and Business of the Day ; or to get an Acquaintance, and establish an Interest in the World, they are first drawn into the Conversation, and then into the Sins of the

the Company. And because younger and more tender Minds are apt to start Objections, and to be a little backward and shy, they soften the harsher Appearances, and harder Names of things, by more easy and less offensive ones. Thus they call the most sordid Meanness, Wariness and Thrift; profane Mirth and open Looseness, the Freedoms of Conversation; and downright Debauchery, by the more plausible and courtly Name of Pleasure and Complaisance. Thus they satisfy the Scruples of the fearful and unexperienced, and soften their Minds into a more easy Compliance. So the Serpent beguiled *Eve*, *You shall not surely die* *. There is no such Danger or Harm as you imagine. For God doth know that in the day you eat thereof, your Eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as Gods, knowing Good and Evil †. He represents the forbidden and fatal Evil, as the most innocent and charming thing in the World: And so these Sinners in the Context; *Let us lurk privily for the Innocent without Cause, let us swallow them up alive as the Grave, and whole as those that go down to the Pit* ||, i. e. entire and beyond the Possibility of Discovery; as safe and secure from being found out as those that are thrown down a Precipice, or buried in the Grave.

2. By flattering *Perswasions*. Thus neglecting the stricter Reasons of things, or even the plausible Appearances of Truth, they apply themselves directly to the Affections. They strike at the ruling Passions, and take hold of the Mind by that more sure and easy Handle; and by alluring Perswasions and pressing Solicitations, often easily flatter and deceive. *Joseph's Mistress spoke to him day by day* *. The Sinners in the Text animate and encourage their Fellows: *Come with us, let us wait for Blood* †. So the Harlot: *With her much fair speaking she caused him to yield, and with the flattering of her Lips she forc'd him* ||. And the Apostle tells us of some, *that by good Words and fair Speeches deceive the Heart of the Simple* ||||, i. e. plain and unwary Persons. So Sinners sometimes prevail with others, by the meer Dint of Importunity and Arts of Address; by often repeating the Exhortation, by earnest Expression of Concern; and high Professions of Value and Esteem: They will tell you with great Civility and Kindness, how much they value your Conversation, how acceptable 'twill be to all the Company, how loth they are to go without you, and to lose the Satisfaction of so agreeable a Companion.

I might further add under this Head; the lighter Exercises of Wit is with some an engaging Method of Enticing to Sin. Not that true Wit any more than right Reason has any ill Influence

* Gen. 3. 4. † Ver. 8. || Ver. 11, 12. * Gen. 39. 10. † Ver. 11. || Chap. 7. 21. |||| Rom. 16. 18.

or unfriendly aspect upon the Cause of Vertue and Religion, however 'tis sometimes perverted and abused to so ill a Service. But 'tis usually by meer Flashes, and even Froth of lighter Wits, by Railery and Banter, artificial Mockery, and ingenious Reproach, they make younger Persons ashamed of themselves, and laugh modest Persons out of Countenance. Many are first inviegled with the Arts of witty Sinners, with the Airs of their Conversation, the Turns of Language, the Pleasantness or Severity of their Reflections; like *Solomon's Harlot* that was not only *subtle of Heart* *, i.e. a cunning and witty Person; but her *Lip dropt as the Honey-Comb*, and her *Mouth was smother than Oil* †. She had the Charms and Graces of Speech, and the Powers of Eloquence and Perswasion. And by this Means one witty Person that happens to have a little more Sense and Ingenuity than the rest of the Company, will make a sportful Entertainment to many, and spread the pleasing Infection round about him.

(2.) By the Power of *Example*. And this is the most usual and prevailing Method of all, and most agreeable to the other Principle of our Nature, Sense. The Examples of Sinners have strong Influence and various Advantages. For Instance,

Examples are *sensible* things, and entice and draw in a natural way. Nothing has so great a Force upon humane Nature, or so generally prevails in the World, as the Example of others. Hence it has been always found, that the Power of Example will prevail against the wisest Precepts, and the strictest Sanctions and Obligations of Laws, and we see by sad Experience every day how easily Men break through all Enclosures and Restraints, to live at large, and be free and unconfined. Examples are near them, and always present; they lie low, and are upon a Level to the meanest Capacity; they strike powerfully upon the grosser Sense that is the prevailing Principle with most, and strongly move and excite to Imitation; and will very easily prevail against the Reason and Conviction of their own Minds, and the Power and Authority of others to the contrary. So *Adam* eat the forbidden Fruit perhaps as much by the Power of *Eve's* Example, as by her Counsel and Advice. And the Children of *Israel* first changed their Original Government, and afterwards frequently run into Idolatry, by the meer Example of the Heathen Nations round about them. In short, the Infection of Sin spreads like the Plague, and is conveyed like some natural Distempers, by the Conversation.

Besides, they prevail by their *Numbers*. When there is a great many of them. Numbers give Countenance and Authority to things otherwile absurd and contrary to Mens own Inclination.

* Chap. 7. 10. † Chap. 5. 3.

General Custom will at any time not only take off the natural Reproach and Disgrace, but even stamp a Value, and derive a Repute upon very sinful and ridiculous Actions. It shall be reckoned for Instance a reputable thing to swear by their Maker, or run into open Excesses, because 'tis fashionable, and the Generality do so. Men are disposed to walk in the *broad way*, because *many go therein*; they are sure of a great deal of Company; and naturally *follow the Multitude to do Iniquity*. The Truth of it is, there is scarce any thing Men seem to be more afraid of, than being singular, and to differ from others about them, and I confess in lawful and innocent things, 'tis a needless Preciseness, and a nauseous Vanity: But Men carry this Principle so far as to run into forbidden and destructive Paths, in Complaisance to their Company, and will not strike out of the common Road, or walk in a more private or less frequented Path, tho' it be never so much more safe and pleasant a way. And indeed there are so many Clubs and Cabals of Sinners get together in almost every Place, that 'tis extremely difficult to be singularly good, and requires a confirmed Vertue to withstand their Force. They draw in all about them, and like the imaginary Vortex's, suck into themselves whatsoever comes within their Influence and Reach.

But especially if *Authority* be added to Numbers. If it be the Examples of our Superious; such as we profess to value and reckon better than our selves. This arms the Example of others with a mighty Force, and renders it almost irresistible, like a Load-stone armed with Steel. If Children see their Parents run into Sin, or Servants their Masters, in private Families; if they see them careless of Religion, loose in their Lives, extravagant or profane, how easily do they learn it by meer Example. Even little Children will learn the Language of Hell as they do their Mother-Tongue, by hearing others talk about them; and I could tell you of some that have seemed to suck it in with their Milk, and have lisped out their broken Curses and Oaths before they could speak plain: How easily are Subjects lead into open Profaneness and general Debauchery, in Imitation of their Prince and Rulers, as we feel the ill Effects to this day of a notorious Instance of this sort, above 30 Years ago. Younger Persons are powerfully swayed by the prevailing Example of those they reverence and admire, and will be brought to submit to the meanest Compliances and basest Lusts, because, forsooth, other Gentlemen, perhaps the Generality of Men of Figure and Condition in the World do so. Who yet it may be have nothing so eminent in them as their Folly, and are more distinguished by their Vices than by their Quality.

But above all; If the Examples of others are also agreeable and happen to suit our own Sentiments and Inclinations. When they are not only adorn'd with Parts and Wit, and recommended by Numbers and Authority, which will oftentimes prevail against Inclination and Interest too; but especially when they are pleasing, and strike in with our own Corruptions, with the predominant Lust or the prevailing Interest, then 'tis like sweet Poison in a pleasant Vehicle that is swallowed down with a greedy Pleasure. This gives the greatest Advantage to evil Examples that there are Seeds of suitable Corruption within, that like rank Weeds naturally grow and spread without the Labour of the Husbandman. And 'tis no wonder Men are drawn to the Commission of Sin by so powerful an Engine, to which they are themselves so strongly inclined. Such as generally prevail with them, and are difficultly withstood, as sinful Pleasures, Games, &c. So the Devil easily prevail'd with Judas to betray his Lord, because he was a Thief, and bore the Bag. And Demas was drawn to forsake the Apostles, having loved this present World.

I shall only observe further, that Examples work gradually, and in an insensible manner. They begin with lower Instances, and steal upon us by undiscerned Degrees. No Sinner is completely wicked all at once; there are many rising Steps by which they gradually ascend before they arrive to great Proficiencies; and to the highest Perfection in Sin. Thus Men first learn to lose the Dread of Sin, before they venture upon the free Commission of it; they lose the Reverence of God, and the Fear of an Oath, before they come to curse and swear; and to drink more freely, and repeat the Frolick before they grow customary Drunkards and perfect Sots. And so by daily Conversation and frequent Practice, they run through all the Scenes of Wickedness in the World, and grow at length to Impudence in Sin, and Hardness of Heart.

II. I am to consider the *Warning* or Caution it self against the Enticements of Sinners; *Consent thou not*, i. e. not only mental Approbation, but practical Compliance. Now here I shall do these two things; 1. Consider the Reasons why we should not consent. 2. Represent the Danger of Consenting.

§. 1. Consider the *Reasons* why we should not consent. And I shall argue the Reasonableness of this out of the Text, and we shall find every Term of the Text a very pregnant Topick of Reason to this Purpose. For Instance,

(1.) Consider the *Character* of the Persons that do entice. *If Sinners entice thee*. Now that is the most disgraceful Character in the Language of the Wise Man, and especially of this Book of *Proverbs*. Sinners are called *Fools*; and Sinner and Fool are made equivalent Expressions, and mean one and the same thing.

A Companion of Fools shall be destroyed *. And *Fools make a mock of Sin* †. And speaking of younger Sinners; *I beheld among the simple ones, and discerned among the Youths a young Man void of Understanding* †. Sinners in the Pride of their own Hearts, and their great Civility to others, think themselves the only wise Persons, that they only have Understanding, and that Wisdom will die with them. They look upon serious humble circumspect Christians, as a Company of tame cowardly precise Fools. But 'tis the Sinner is the Fool in the more equal and righteous Estimate of the wise God, and of the wisest of Men. Sinners act the grossest Absurdities, the most unreasonable things in the World; below the Capacity and Dignity of a reasonable Soul; against their truest and highest Interest. They neglect the Care of an immortal Spirit for the sake of a frail and perishing Body; the infinitely important Concerns of an eternal World, for the Pleasures and Trifles, which Men call the Business of this World. And accordingly we find that holy Men that have tried both sides, and are the most competent Judges, have owned their own Folly, and condemned themselves. So did the holy Psalmist: *So foolish and ignorant was I, I was as a Beast before thee* †. And the humble Confession of holy Agar; *Surely I am more brutish than any Man, and have not the Understanding of a Man* ‡.

And will you listen to Fools? Will you suffer your selves to be under the Influence and Direction of Men void of Understanding, that act so unreasonable a part in their own Concerns? Are they fit to prescribe to others, that betray so great Weakness, and so ill conduct themselves?

(2.) Consider the *Nature* of the Evil to which they entice. *If Sinners entice thee, i. e.* Either from thy Duty, or into Sin; either negative or positive Sin. Now Sin is the greatest Evil in the World, and is the only thing that is naturally and essentially evil; that is Evil in its own Nature, and has nothing else but Evil in it. Consider it either with respect to God or to your selves. 'Tis a direct Contrariety to the blessed God, the Fountain of Perfection and Felicity; the Spring of Life and Being, the last End, and chiefest Good of the Creation. Especially 'tis a Contradiction to his glorious Holiness, the Purity of the Divine Nature; the Brightness and Beauty of all his Perfections. 'Tis a Breach of his righteous Law, and so a Contempt of his Sovereign Authority, daring his Omnipotence and Justice, trampling under foot the wise and gracious Constitutions of Heaven for the Good of the World.

Besides, If you consider it with respect to your selves; 'tis not

* Ch. 13. 20. † Ch. 14. 9. ‡ Ch. 7. 7. || Psal. 73. 22. † Prov. 30. 2. only

only the most scandalous and reproachful, but the most ruinous and destructive Evil. 'Tis a degrading our noble Natures, gratifying the lower Appetites, and the vilest Passions of our Natures, and make Men not only Fools but Beasts. How many by mean and brutish Lusts bear a much nearer Resemblance to Goats and Swine, than vertuous, or even reasonable Souls? And is it not fatally destructive to the best Interest of Body and Soul, of the loved and admired Body, that is so carefully pampered and adorned, as well as of the precious neglected Soul; to the truest Interests of this World, as well as the other, *i. e.* the Favour of God, and the Esteem of the Wise and Good? In short, it brings under the deepest Guilt, and exposes to Hell.

Now consent not to the Enticements of Sinners, for 'tis the greatest Wrong and Unrighteousness, the most unworthy and injurious thing in all the World. 'Tis to embrace a Viper, and a Fiend of Hell, that will eat out thy Bowels, and sting thee to Death. What you cannot but condemn and disown in your wiser Reason and cooler Thoughts; what you will be sure to wish undone, and cannot but be sorry for at last.

(3.) Consider their *Enticing*. The word signifies to allure and deceive. There is no Reality and Truth in all the Enticings of Sinners, they cannot make good their Pretences. The Event will betray, and Experience will contradict them all. The Enticements of Sinners are like the Temptations of the Devil, that are represented by *Devices, Wiles, and Stratagems*. There are many Arts and great Guile, fair Appearances and Proposals of Pleasure and Advantage; but 'tis all Deceit; Snares for the Simple, they are beguiled as the *Serpent beguiled Eve*. He was too cunning for her, and cheated her with fair and false Pretences, by wrong Representations, and downright Falshood.

Now, if Sinners entice thee, consent thou not; don't suffer thy self to be imposed upon by such wretched Sophistry, and so thin an Appearance; ben't deluded by meer Artifice and Deceit.

(4.) I might argue from the Consideration of your own *Consent*. Consent is willing, the free Approbation and Compliance of the Soul. 'Tis matter of Choice; and tho' 'tis under the Influence and Direction of the Father of Spirits, who turns the Heart as the Rivers of Waters are turned; yet as to all the Powers of the Creature, of Men and Devils, 'tis the free and unconstrained Act of the Soul. Sinners cannot force your Consent, or offer any Violence to your Mind. No not the Devil himself, nor all the Devils in Hell can force a Mind. They can only entice and tempt to Sin; propose suitable Objects, and proper Baits, and sollicit and perswade; but they can't make you consent whether you will or no, and do what you can to the contrary: For then we should

should lie at the Mercy of the Devil and wicked Men, and should do nothing else but sin as long as we live; and that were a sad and miserable Condition indeed.

So that if you consent, 'tis the free Choice of your own Minds. *You choose the Evil, and refuse the Good.* A resolute Denial would easily baffle a powerful Assault, and very alluring Enticements to an obstinate Resistance, would be like poison'd Arrows shot against stone Walls, easily blunted and repelled. And will you yield to so dangerous an Evil, under so slight a Disguise, when you *may* refuse, and all they can do cannot *make* you consent.

§ 2. Represent the *Danger* of Consenting; the great Mischiefs that accrue.

(1.) You bring *Guilt* upon your own Souls. You become Partakers with them of their Sin. *When thou sawest a Thief, then thou consentedst with him, and hast been Partaker with Adulterers* *. You have *Fellowship* † with them in the unfruitful Works of Darkness. 'Tis their Sin to entice you to Sin; as the Temptations of the Devil; the Injection of evil Thoughts, or Instigation to evil Actions, are his Sin. But 'tis only his Sin if he don't prevail, tho it may be our Unhappiness and Trouble. The Enticement of *Eve* to eat the forbidden Fruit, would have been nevertheless *his* Sin, had she refused to consent. And 'twas undoubtedly his Sin to tempt our blessed Lord, tho he was able to make no Impression, and prevailed nothing. So 'tis their Sin to entice, whether they prevail or no; but 'tis theirs only, if we refuse our Consent. The Guilt rests on one Side, and we are innocent and clear; which was exactly the Case of *Joseph* under the Enticements of his Mistress ||.

But now by consenting to their Enticements, we make the Sin our own. By consenting to Sin thou makest thy self a Sinner. Every Temptation of another thou compliest with, thou drawest a Guilt upon thy own Head. So that as thou valuest thy own Innocence and Peace, if thou regardest the Purity and Safety of thy own Soul, when Sinners entice thee, consent thou not.

(2.) Hereby also you heighten and increase *their* Guilt who entice you to Sin. 'Tis indeed their Sin to entice, but if you refuse to consent, their Sin is hereby the less, as well as your own Innocence secure. They will be only chargeable with their own sinful Act, their Enticing you to Sin: But if you consent to their Enticement, and are drawn thereby to the Commission of Sin, they are brought under a further Guilt, and chargeable with the Sin to which they entice you. There is a Partnership of Guilt on each side; as you become Partakers of their Sin, by sinning

* Psal. 50. 18. † Eph. 5. 11. || Gen. 39.

with them, so they are Partakers of your Guilt, as the Tempters and Occasions of it; so *Jeroboam* is often charged with making all *Israel* sin. They share in all the Guilt you contract by their Enticement: And this usually runs a great Length. How much Guilt is contracted between them both before they have done, by the mutual Enticements and Consent of evil Companions. One thing draws on another, and they easily run beyond all Bounds, and exceed their first Designs.

So that whereas you think to gratify and oblige those to whom you consent, you do them in reality the greatest Unkindness and Hurt. You wound and stab the Soul of another Man, as well as your own, whenever you consent to sin with them. He draws you into the Commission of Sin, and you draw him under a great deal of the Guilt of it. So that if he is your Friend, or one whom you pretend to value and love, that entices you to Sin, consent thou not, for his Sake, as well as thy own, as you value and regard the Sinner himself.

(3.) By this means you give them an easier *Admission* into your Souls, and an entire *Ascendant* over you. When they have prevailed upon you, and gained your Consent, they are encouraged to venture again, and grow more bold in their Attempts, and more secure of Success. When once you have broke thro' the Restraints of natural Modesty, violated the Principles of Education, shook off the Checks of Shame and Fear; you lie open to all the Inroads of Temptations, and become like a City without Walls, or a wide Gap in a broken Hedge, that is liable to any easy Surprise, and where every ranging Beast of Prey enters in, and makes waste. You will no longer be able to resist and withstand them, and become an easy Prey to every Enticement. You will lose the Liberty and Dominion of your own Spirit, and lie at the Mercy of every one that will be at the pains to tempt you, and become at length perfect Slaves to the Humours and the Lusts of other Men, at the Call and Direction of every artificial Nod or Beck, or Wink. As the Wise Man speaks of the Fool, whom the Harlot with much fair speaking caused to yield; *He goes after her strait way, as an Ox to the slaughter, or a Fool to the Correction of the Stocks* *, that has no sense where he is going, or Power to resist.

You'll certainly find it by sad Experience, the oftner you consent to their Enticements, the easier they'll gain your Consent; and by long Custom, and frequent Success, get at length the entire Ascendant and Dominion over you. You give the Reins out of your own Hands, and they can lead and turn you which way soever they please.

(4.) Here-

(4.) Hereupon you will contract *Habits* of Sin, and grow the more *bold* in the Commission of it. What was before more rarely committed, and it may be with some Reluctance of Mind, becomes at length familiar and easy, and grows at last natural and necessary; they can't live without it, and often sin when they don't know it. And as by frequent Acts they first contract the Habit of Sin, (which is as a second Nature within them) so a contracted Habit naturally leads to frequent Commission. By often consenting they lose all Remainders of natural Tenderneſs, and grow bold and secure. They can embrace an Evil with Delight, that before they started at the Sight of; and roll the poisonous Sweet under the Tongue, that gave Horroſur to their Thoughts. And as *Hazael* told *Eliſha*, when he prophesied of his Cruelty to *Iſrael*, when he should be King of *Syria*; *Is thy Servant a Dog, that he should do this.* So they often run into the Commission of those Sins, that they could never have believed concerning themselves, and that no one else would ever have thought concerning them; even to the highest Improvements of Sin and open Boldneſs, and Impudence in it; to be Scorners of Goodneſs, and Enticers of others to Evil; to Greedineſs in the Commission, and Glorſying in their Shame; *not only doing the ſame things, but having Pleaſure in them that do them* *.

(5.) This will render your *Recovery* exceeding difficult. Rooted Habits, that have been gradually growing up, and are arrived to Maturity, are very difficultly broken and overcome. They require an extraordinary Power of Divine Grace, and cauſe many a ſevere Smart and bitter Pang; like tearing up an old Tree by the Roots, that has ſtuck deep, and ſpread wide under Ground. *Can the Ethiopian change his Skin, or the Leopard his Spots, then may you that are accuſtomed to do Evil, learn to do Well* †.

Eſpecially when Sinners fall under Hardneſs of Heart, and a ſeared Mind, and that both in a natural and a judicial way. When they contract Hardneſs by Habits, and become by long Cuſtom like the beaten Road. Or when they are given up by God to their own Hardneſs, and deſerted of the Succours of Divine Grace; ſo that they can bear the plainest Reproofs without Concern, deſpiſe the moſt powerful Means of their Recovery. They are deaf, as Adders, to the loudeſt Calls and the ſweeteſt Charms of Divine Mercy; and hard and inſenſible as the nether Millſtone, to all the Strivings of the Spirit of God, and all the Impreſſions of Means.

They are bewitched, as well as enſnared, by the Enticements of Sinners, and cannot be perſwaded to quit their old Company.

* Rom. i. ult. † Jer. 13. 23.

ns, and their wonted Course, by all their Hopes of Heaven, and all the Terrors of the Lord. They are joined to their Idols, and need on-ly the awful Permission, *Let them alone*, to render their Case incurable, and set them beyond the Hopes of Relief. So that in this Case we may say of evil Company, as the wise Man does of the Harlots Deceits; *Her House inclines to Death, and her Path to the Dead; None that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the Path of Life* * : i. e. comparatively none, exceeding few, that go so far, ever recover themselves from the dangerous Snare. 'Tis a most deplorable Case when a Sinner is brought to this pass; rendered insensible to Means, and forsaken of Divine Grace.

(6.) It will render your final *Ruin* extremely terrible, if you ben't recovered. The Consequence is ruinous and destructive. *They lie in wait for their own Blood, they lurk privily for their own Life* † : *A Companion of Fools shall be destroy'd* ‖. If you sin with them, you must perish with them too, and be Partakers with them of their Plagues, as well as of their Crimes. And let me tell you, evil Companions on Earth will be very ill Company in Hell; the most witty and admired among your Fellow-Sinners will be the most unwelcome and disagreeable; the most merry and jovial, will become the most discontented, the most restless, the most furious and revengeful. They will mutually upbraid and torment one another; "O thou cursed Creature, will the eluded Sinner say, that first enticed me to sin, that drew me into the fatal Snare. O that I had never once seen thy Face on Earth, that had never contracted a Friendship, or conceived any Opinion of thee. If it had not been for thy Enticement, I might have escaped this dreadful Misery, and obtained eternal Happiness; but now must I lie for ever in these raging Flames and restless Torments, with the Devil and his Angels, upon thy account. On the other hand, the enticing Sinner will have reason to say; "O thou wretched and foolish Creature, that consentedst to my Enticements, O why didst thou not refuse? I had been more easy in this Place of Torment, if thou hadst not been so foolish to consent. I had then only bore the Punishment of my own Sin, but now must I suffer for the Sin to which I enticed thee, and my eternal Torments must be aggravated for thy sake. For this reason some think the rich Man in the Parable desired one from the Dead might be sent to his Five Brethren on Earth, *lest they also come into that Place of Torments*, i. e. to aggravate his Misery, who had enticed them to sin, or been one of their sinful Companions on Earth ‖.

III. I am to propose proper *Counsels* and Directions. And to render this the more suitable to every Case, and so the more effectual, I shall consider you all either as such as have never consented, or at least have been recovered; or else as such who have consented, and lie under the Snare. I have something briefly to offer to each.

* Prov. 2. 18, 19. † Ver. 18. ‖ Chap. 13. 20.

¶ See a very serious and judicious Discourse on this Subject, by Mr. Town of Portsmouth, called, *A Caveat against Evil Company.*

§ 1. As to those that have not consented, that have retained their Innocence, or are recovered from the Snare; I would just propose the proper Means of their Preservation.

(1.) Beware of needless Familiarity and Friendship with Sinners. Indeed as the World now stands, 'tis next to impossible not to converse with Sinners, and indeed is not required. I wrote to you not to company with Fornicators, yet not altogether with the Fornicators of this World, or Covetous, or Extortioners; for then must you needs go out of the World*.

The Obligations of natural and civil Relations, and of the necessary Business and Affairs of Life, may make it sometimes, very fit and unavoidable to keep Company with very wicked and scandalous Persons. And when 'tis at the Call of Providence, and in the way of Duty, we may safely venture, and may humbly expect to be preserved. But beware of chosen Society, and needless Familiarity of conversing with Sinners without a sufficient Cause, or any valuable End, with Frequency, Freedom and Delight. Don't make an open Sinner a Bosom-Friend, or an intimate Companion of Life; especially a wicked Professor of Religion. Enter not into the Path of the Wicked, and go not in the Way of evil Men†. And the Apostle requires; If any Man is called a Brother, with such, no not to eat. The Infection will easily spread by the Freedoms of Conversation, and you will catch it before you are aware. And tho' you owe Civility to every Man, yet Friendship is matter of Choice, and is too sacred to be prostituted to the Unworthy and the Vile.

(2.) Watch against the first Beginnings of this Evil. When the Company begin to break thro' the Bounds of Sobriety and Religion, or break in upon the Rules of Decency and good Manners; be alarmed into a Sense of Danger. Watch against the early Tendency and distant Approaches of Sin. By dallying and playing with the Temptation, many have been easily ensnared and drawn before they are aware to Consent and Commission too. If they grow rude and profane, fly the Company if you can; or if there is no other way of Security openly, and if it must be so, singly protest against the Wickedness of it. Let their Wickedness kindle a holy Indignation, and fire your Soul with a Divine Zeal. Fear not the Faces, and value not the Favour of foolish Sinners, how numerous and great soever, that don't reverence the great God, and are not afraid of Hell.

(3.) Fortify your Hearts against their Enticements. You may not always be able to avoid the Company of Sinners, or prevent the breaking out of Sin; but go armed into evil Company, and be always upon your Guard. Summon in the Speccours of Reason and serious Thoughts; steel your Mind with holy Resolution; especially awe your Souls with a Sense of the Divine Presence. How shall I do this Wickedness, and sin against God||; not only against his holy Law, but under his observing Eye. Go into the Company of Sinners, when Providence directs the Course, as you would go among infected Persons, or into a noisom Air, not without some Preservative about

* 1 Cor. 5. 10. † Prov. 4. 14. || Gen. 39. 9.

you, against the catching Plague, and the hurtful Vapours that rise up round about you.

(4.) Associate your selves with Righteous Persons. *A Companion of fools shall be destroy'd, but he that walketh with wise Men shall be wise* *. There is no need of absolute Solitude, of abandoning all Society, and retiring out of the World, and dwelling in the Cells and Cloysters of Monks and Hermits; for that were to run from the Enemy, that is to be overcome. You might carry the Infection with you, or meet with much of it there. And the World is not yet so desolate and forsaken of all Good, that there are none to be found fit to converse with. There is here and there a humble, a wise, and a virtuous Person. Esteem the Righteous *more excellent than his Neighbour*. Seek out the most chearful, upright, experienced Persons. Make them your chosen and esteemed Friends, that are the *Friends of God*, and *precious in the sight of the Lord*. Whose Hearts are entirely devoted to God, whose Speech is seasoned with Salt, ministering Grace to the hearers, and whose Conversation tends to the Improvement of Knowledge, and Bettering of your Spirits; and I will add, is not less easie and delightful than that of Sinners, but much more useful and safe. And indeed there is no such pleasant Company on Earth, as the Conversation of wise and virtuous Persons.

(5.) Shun *Idleness*, and be always suitably imploy'd in your proper Business. Evil Company, like the evil One, go stroling up and down the Earth, seeking to get a Prey, and always find the greatest advantage over idle Persons. Idleness and Sloth is a Temptation to the Tempter, and an Enticement to Sinners to intice you. 'Tis the fruitful Parent and indulgent Nurse of every hateful Vice.

Be diligent in the Duties of your respective Callings. Be always employed in some innocent and useful Work, that you may be able to say of evil Company, and of the evil One, as the Excellent Calvin did of his Lord; *I am resolv'd when he comes, he shall never find me idle*.

(6.) And above all, Beg continual Help from Heaven. The divine Grace is the only Security, and Prayer the last Refuge for your Safety. Do Sinners entice and press thy Consent? Does the tempting Object smile, and is thy treacherous Heart ready to yield? Dart up a fervent Desire to Heaven, Call in Succour from above, Engage God on your side. So will you fix your wandering Heart, recruit your fainting Spirits, charm away the Tempter, and preserve your selves from the most powerful Assault.

§. 2. As to those that have consented to the Enticements of Sinners, and lie under the Snare, I shall only beg leave, in order to their Recovery, to suggest the following Hints of Direction.

Be deeply *humble* before God, under the Sense of your great Guilt. Plainly represent the Matter to your own Minds, freely acknowledge it before God, with all its Aggravations; heartily bewail the prevalence of Corruption, and mourn over your own Folly; O foolish and wretched Creature, that ever I shou'd consent to the En-

tements of Sinners, and offend and dishonour my God! That thou'd hate my best Friend, and wrong my own Soul, love Death, and gratify none but the Devil!

Again; Immediately quit your evil Company; else you do nothing. 'Tis a fruitless and pernicious thing to groan under the Sense of Sin; and pretend a great deal of Sorrow, while you retain a secret Liking, and return again to Folly. And nothing tends more to Hardness and Security, than trifling with Conscience, and stifling the Convictions of your Minds. You must not expect to be delivered from Evil, while you lead your selves into Temptation. Take Courage, Come to a Point, Form a serious Resolution under the Power of a present Conviction, that by the Grace of God, from this Day forward, you will never go among your wicked Companions any more. Let them flout and jeer, let them scorn and revile. Can you despise the Laughter of Fools? Is it not easier to bear their impotent Scorn and Rage at present, than be tormented with them in Hell, and weep, and wail, and gnash the Teeth for ever. Forsake the Foolish and live, and go in the Way of Understanding. * 1 But,

Again; Attend to the Call of heavenly Wisdom, and the Instructions of his Word. *Wisdom crieth, she uttereth her Voice, how long ye simple will you love Simplicity; Scorners delight in Scorning, and Fools hate Knowledge? Turn ye at my Reproof, I will pour out my Spirit, and make known my Words unto You. †* And in another Place; *Doth not Wisdom cry, and Understanding put forth her Voice. Unto you, O Men, I call, and my Voice is to the Sons of Men. O ye Simple understand Wisdom, and Fools be of an understanding Heart. Hear, I will speak of excellent Things. ||* Do Sinners entice, and does not the Lord Jesus, the eternal Wisdom of the Father, graciously invite? Do they flatter, and does not he promise? Do they urge and importune, and does not his Spirit strive and work? Regard the kind and earnest Calls of the Blessed Jesus, as your Encouragement and Warrant, and oppose them to all the Arts and Enticements of Sinners, and all the Discouragements and Fear of your own guilty and mis-giving Hearts.

To conclude, Earnestly beg healing and renewing Grace. *O pardon my Iniquity for 'tis great. Heal my diseased Soul. Rectify my disordered Powers. Create in me a clean Heart; and renew a right Spirit within me. Let thy Grace be always sufficient for me. Lean not to your own Understanding, or your own Strength, if ever you hope to prevail, or expect to be safe. Let your entire Dependance and Expectation, be upon the Almighty Grace of God, that can recover you out of the Snare; and is only able, and blessed be God, is effectually able, after all your many Falls, to preserve you from Falling.*

* Prov. 9. 6. † Chap. 1. 20, 21. || Chap. 8. 1.

F I N I S.